

Discard the Dividing Line: Conversing with paul m.

By Jack Galmitz

JG: Hi, Paul. Welcome to Roadrunner Haiku Journal as an interviewee.

pm: Glad to be here, Jack. Thanks for having me.

JG: Congratulations on the publication of your latest book, [a few days north days few](#) (Redmoon Press, 2011); it's quite a compelling body of work and your original linocuts compliment it. I find the linocuts resemble the poems: both carefully strip away everything except what you want to stand out and both have a simplicity that culminates from sophistication. Do you find a similarity in the two practices?

pm: That's an interesting observation. However I'm not sure the end result of either is as premeditated as you make it sound. Peter Yovu once wrote that a haiku "is a balance between control and surrender." I think that is a key concept of any creative act. An experienced poet is really just an observant poet, meaning that at all times they have twenty kigo in their head—what is representative around/within them at that moment—and that the rest of the poem is their reaction to that representation. A kigo is simply the bedrock

we all share, and each poet leaps from it. I think we have control over that first part in the sense that we understand it, but we can be surprised by the leap. Regarding the illustrations, I had definitive ideas of what I wanted the picture to look like, but so much of “getting to the end result” was outside my control—whether it was my lack of skill, or the surprise that what I thought would hold ink didn’t. But both creative acts clearly work that balance.

JG: Speaking of control and surrender, you have certainly been influenced by the naturalist, [John Muir](#). But, I sense an equal impact in your work from the American Transcendentalists. For instance, your first poem

with eyes closed spring grass

reminds me of Walt Whitman’s “I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass.” And your assiduous searching for happenings in the natural world reminds me of Henry David Thoreau’s remarks that “we must learn to ...keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn”; and his view that to “transact some private business...to trade with the Celestial Empire,” which was Nature, would elevate his soul. The universe, for the Transcendentalists, was akin to Richard Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness. Would you agree that your influences can be traced to these forebears?

pm: Very much so. That’s a great quote from Thoreau, conscious as he was of life’s continuous creation. As a child of the Los Angeles suburbs and then as a resident of San Francisco for a number of years, I have always felt that half of the world was missing. That half I discovered in Nature. So I make time to get out into it, to see its relationships, and to see what it can teach me about its larger self, including myself. I am hesitant (I’m an accountant after all) to

extend those mysteries to the larger cosmic consciousness Bucke speaks of, but the writings of the transcendentalists have helped me steer my own thoughts. Interestingly, Dee Evetts in an issue of Frogpond once asked the haiku community why so many poems were written about nature when so many of the poets lived in cities. I answered that cities are static and lacked seasons, and in turn our relationship to the changing seasons. Life is change. It is Thoreau's 'dawn.' And I'd argue that humans have a seasonal clock. I don't think it's a coincidence that the natural world mimics our emotional lifetime.

JG: Paul, your haiku for the most part are written in the classical mode: a "seasonal reference," followed by a pause or cut, and followed by complimentary or contrary elements. For me, this is reminiscent of Thoreau's admonition "I say beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes." Your choice of a traditional form for your haiku also reminds me of other spiritual heritages—particularly the Amish and Chasidim—who choose simple black suits, because this is suitable for the conventional world and releases the wearer's intellectual energy to devote to higher purposes. Your formatting also reminds me somewhat again of Thoreau's hut at Walden; if you recall he borrowed an ax, bought and re-used some boards from another house, and otherwise used materials available from his natural environment. I think we can definitely see in one of your poems how you build from heritage and what's readily available:

sparrow song
a fence built
of found logs

You have included in your volume some experimental haiku, which I'll get to later. But for now, I wonder how you respond to my above analysis of your preference for tradition.

pm: There was a year recently in which I was very worried that the repetitiveness of the form would become tiresome, and looked to writers like John Martone to see how I could vary what you call the 'classical' three-line structure, to open up a poem mid-line or mid-word (something he does very interestingly) to create misreadings and extra-readings. But ultimately I decided that such misreadings were things to be used sparingly, since in most cases I am trying to share a particular moment, and those misreadings draw too much attention to themselves. Perhaps the choice of picture over frame? Yet, while I do write the majority of my poems in the 'classical' structure, I allow myself the freedom to follow the poem, and let it dictate its own structure—whether three line, one line, or many. I suspect all writers go through that struggle with form, especially a form like haiku which we (correctly or incorrectly) inherited.

JG: Well, I find your forms virtuous—pleasing and balanced. I do not think they slip into the weaknesses that a predetermined format for a poem might tend: repetition, imitation, even self-imitation, numbing of the sensitivities. In fact, my overall impression of your poems is that they convey virtue as a moral character, a human characteristic, and they achieve this because of your engagement in your subjects, but more of this later. I'd like to take a look first at the few experimental haiku that you include in your volume. The first one I'd like to look at was published previously in Roadrunner:

outdated magazines
in the green room
of a rose

I remember reading it, liking it, but not quite grasping it. Now that I've had more time to examine it, I think it creatively captures the green sepals opening and separating as the rose matures; what was initially fresh, fragrant, even a bit glossy—the sepals—containing all that was new, as magazines are when shiny and contain the latest information, become outworn and exist in a separate space—room—at the presence of the flower. I think the poem uses metaphor quite powerfully.

Rather than discuss the pros and cons of metaphor in haiku—once frowned upon—I would point to the wonderful, excited reception the Japanese haikai had to the haiku of Tomas Tranströmer and its use of metaphor as reported by Kaj Falkman in his Homage to Tomas Tranströmer in Japan, [which can be found on the Haiku Foundation's blog, Troutswirl](#).

Before moving on to some other examples of your experimental haiku, how did you feel when you wrote what would be called a post-modernist haiku?

pm: A short answer would be that I felt 'excited!' As evident by their sparse number in the book, they are something I'm still working out. In the last few years we've seen an explosion of exciting non-traditional haiku at the periphery of the community, some similar to Japanese gendai work, but often more of an abstract style that is definitely American. One of the first such poems I saw was your own 'Inside of me / Bison are stampeding / Across caves' which remains today one of my favorite haiku of all-time. I think my poem works in a similar way, although I am hesitant to explain it since logical summations distort its more organic genesis. The poem plays with the idea of a 'green room' which is traditionally a room stage performers wait in before they go on stage. I had in mind the green room of the Tonight Show or Letterman with their true and pseudo

celebrities. The final line makes the imaginative leap (a haiku-leap, if you will) to the room being the calyx of a rose, only now the rose has faded—much like all celebrity will. In reality the tight bud was perceived first and I imagined what might be inside.

JG: The second experimental haiku I'd like to examine is the following:

a line borrowed
from another poet
spring rain

What I find engaging about this poem is the fact that the subject is never really disclosed, although when read another way it is: literally, the poet admits borrowing a line while it is raining outside in spring. Of course, read differently, the facticity of "spring rain" is the borrowed line. This poem operates by ambiguity, a poetic device that's been highly valued in mainstream poetry since the 1950s.

Another poem that works with ambiguity is also a concrete poem: it is spread out on two pages, and the ambiguity arises from the fact that the poems on each page can be read as separate poems, until the reader realizes it is a concrete poem and is actually one poem dragged across two pages:

white wood asters a thousand

years the lake

emptying

Again, ambiguity, as here, is always surprising and so stirring, and the images on the first page are powerfully drawn. Then, in addition, once I realized it was one poem, the long gap, the separation of the poem's parts on two pages, strengthens the number of years it takes for the transformation of a lake into a forest.

Then, there's another haiku that would be called a concrete poem:

all night

thud of
ripe apples
at the

u
&
I

verse's
core

I find the separations of stanzas strategic and strong in this haiku. "all night" implies the length of intimacy between the u and I; the sound of the lovers is natural and comes without control—a "thud", the way "ripe apples," young lovers together do, and I appreciate the reverberation of the word "core" to describe the center of the experience as it reconnects to "ripe apples."

My question to you Paul is do you have a different regard for these experimental haiku than for your more formalistic haiku?

pm: That's an interesting question, and a little like asking a parent who their favorite child is—the one who asks endless questions

(especially ones you don't have the answer to) or the quiet one who breaks windows which inadvertently lets in birdsong? You learn from both. These particular poems presented something that I couldn't resist. The poem "white wood asters" was originally a one-liner to mimic the surface of the lake, and it wasn't until I started placing the poem on the page that I saw how moving its parts could heighten its effect. I'll go back to my earlier comment that I allow myself the freedom to follow the poem where it wants to lead. Each individual poem has a 'feel' for when it is done. A trope in haiku is that we want to leave preconception aside to approach our subjects openly and honestly. That applies to form as well. I'm delighted you recognized "all night" as a haiku, which I definitely consider it to be. That poem in particular begged to be broken apart to create interesting readings. The phrase "u / & / I" (you and I) and "verse" from the original word "universe" would never have risen to the surface without opening it up. That's a poem I won't say more about other than I find it very dynamic. It's a favorite.

JG: As I mentioned earlier, Paul, I consider your forms as vessels for virtues, in the sense of morality, as a human characteristic. I'd like to start this discussion with the oldest, that is, your veneration for the venerable age of the universe and your place in it as "a visitor myself," as a man with a visa so to speak, or as you emphasize it in part of the title of your book "days few." Here are some poems illustrating this:

small plot of land
the same sun
I was born under

sequoia that fell
long before my birth
the path around it

sun on the horizon
who first
picked up a stone

ancient moon
an outgoing wave
reveals sand crab holes

Your choice of such phrases as “small plot of land,” which may either refer to earth itself or even to you; “the path around it,” as perhaps humanities small patch of space in the ancient and huge universe; the beginnings of things in “sun on the horizon,” and our ancestral beginnings and history of aggression and violence; and your well-chosen adjective “ancient” for the moon in contradistinction to the small recent lives of mole crabs; all of this reveals your humility here in the universe. Is the sense of being small and short-lived in the universe the primary source of your veneration?

pm: I’m going to use a definition of ‘veneration’ that means “respect and awe” of which I have plenty for the universe. I’m also going to put a footnote on mankind’s “history of aggression and violence”: the universe is a plenty violent place on its own. But I am astonished by mankind’s Dark Age claim, and in many ways our contemporary selfish insistence, that we are the center of the universe—or even of this planet. The universe is an unknowably huge and complicated place, and the more we look outward, or even inward, regarding our physical presence here and now, we prove time and again that we are really quite insignificant. And in the face of it, quite fragile. While I had recognized that fact in certain poems I hadn’t seen that as a larger theme of my poetry, but upon reflection it certainly is

one. “A man with a visa” well describes my feelings—and perhaps us all. I think your question brings up an interesting point about poetry, especially haiku (if you’ll forgive the sidebar). If we want to write honest poems, and view the world honestly, we speak about leaving preconception aside when we approach our subjects. But that’s a two way street. If we are truly open in our confrontation with the world as it is we bring into the moment our true selves as well. Basho admonished us to go to the pine to learn of the pine. But in the process we don’t just learn the ‘true’ meaning of the pine; we also learn the ‘true’ meaning of ourselves.

JG: While it’s not unprecedented in haiku, your inclusion of the darker side of nature—the struggle to survive, mortality—gives rise to the virtue of compassion in your work. Here are a few examples:

returning geese
her ashes still
in the plain tin

spring morning
flies return
to a crab carcass

stern wind
the branch an osprey
adds to its nest

three new planets
the bitter roe
of a sea urchin

farewell walk
a stretch of shore
known for driftwood

Did compassion develop in you over the years as a result of observation of nature, or was compassion a quality you already possessed, but was perhaps enhanced by your practice of haiku?

pm: I don't know that you can honestly interact with the world and not gain more compassion—either through the practice of poetry, the observation of animals, or simply shopping in a store. Whether I already possessed it is a question for my mother, but I suspect you know the answer she'll give. I mentioned that the universe was a violent place on its own. I do see some poetry, haiku included, that seems to want to veer from that seeing, to only present the beautiful and uplifting, which I find false and a bit cowardly. The world is a complicated and messy place. If we are going to value honesty in poetry we need to represent all that we see.

JG: There is also a generosity in your haiku, Paul, that testifies to your willingness to share the world and your belief that there is room for all things in it. While this is trait of haiku, I find it markedly so in your work.

hand in hand
room enough
for each star

no voice
but for the stones
autumn brook

blue shadows
deep into the snow
split-hoof of a deer

a brook
with a name...
dancing mayflies

These are just a sample of the many instances in your book where you make way for existents in the world, appreciate them for what they are, do homage to life in its variegated forms, show respect, which is generosity of spirit. Having said this, I wonder if you think that the practice of haiku can create by constantly practicing it, generosity and respect beyond the confines of the page and into the world?

pm: I am reluctant to assign that kind of power to poetry, but I will add that I would hope so, but no more so than other literature or music or anything else that is shared between people. I wrote in the introduction to this book that “I believe that we don't share poetry to revel in our differences, but rather to seek comfort in our similarities.” I realize that people often approach haiku for its exoticness, its cultural ‘otherness’; yet I believe people are essentially the same everywhere, and love and fear the same things. After a time—especially after being exposed to other cultures’ arts—that desire for exoticness is hopefully replaced with a recognition of that fact.

JG: Paul, regardless of the fact that you write haiku in the traditional style, there is something uncommon, distinctive about your work. I can literally feel your engagement in each poem, your participation

as observer/creator, so much so that I would say you are not only a man “in” the world, but a man within which is the world. I feel in your works the common divide between subject and object, self and non-self is discarded and no such dividing line exists. The Zen Buddhist monk and writer Thich Nhat Hanh calls such a state of being “inter-being,” or inter-penetration, or co-dependent origination. Few would argue that opposites, the whole range of them, are not contingent upon one another, not defined by one another, but can exist independently. This is not only ancient wisdom, but wisdom shared by modern psychology/psychoanalysis, , modern science in general.

So, though you write classical haiku, you are still modern. As Jorge Luis Borges put it in his book This Craft Of Verse (Harvard University Press, 2000) “we are modern by the very simple fact that we live in the present . . . We are modern whether we want to be or not.”

The question remains how you achieve this state of inter-being and I would venture to say that it is because of your intense observation, love, involvement in your work and subjects that this comes about. And, this in turn, derives from your vigorous, exacting craft of the use of language. I’ll show you what I consider some of the more telling examples.

river of stars
a burning stick
from a neighboring fire

Here we have hermeticism: that which is below corresponds to that which is above...to accomplish the miracle of the One Thing. The divine sparks and the camping sparks: there’s a sense of community, and though there is no ostensible witness, the poet as

crafter is what I call man as metaphor maker, the actual joiner of above and below. Or here:

early dusk...
an inch of snow
on a half inch branch

Though the poem works on the literal level and seems perfectly objective, there is also the metaphoric at play, the slow progress of dusk, spreading beyond the confines of things of the world, larger than them in size, in reach. Again, though the author is literally absent, the world is understood through its migration and transformation through him. Or this:

ring around the moon
the broken face
of a tidal berm

Again, the comparison of the halo round the moon to the elevated berm above the backshore, both round, both with implied faces, is the world as created by the poet, with assonance and consonance both holding the edifice in place, joining it, serves well to illustrate how as a poet you don't merely present images to evoke a mood, but actively create further meaning through association. Or here,

rib shadows
on a loping coyote
a field of cut hay

river in flood-
from low brush
a second moose calf

These two poems you set on the same page. The one, a starving, perishing coyote, the second another new calf, new life. We would not know the state of the coyote if the author did not give us words like “rib shadows” and compare them to “cut hay,” or would we fully feel the impact of starvation without the rising “flood” of the river and its metaphoric relationship to bursting second (additional) life in the birth of the “calf.”

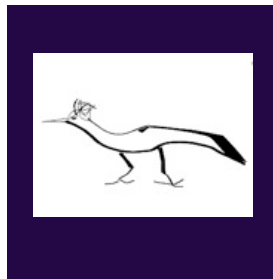
In these poems, and throughout the entire book, we can feel the presence of an author, an author who is complex, dedicated, sophisticated, gentle, compassionate, aware always and attentive to the smallest of details. How do you regard your energetic engagement with the world as envisioned in your poems, Paul?

pm: Thank you for your kind appreciation of my work. To answer your question, while I’m not overtly conscious of the activity, I can only say that I hope I show the interdependence/interpenetration of things that you say. The world is a large and complex place. And I’ll add, a messy one. You are right that I feel life is short, fragile, and that I am but a “man with a visa.” I think if I didn’t try to anchor myself to it somehow I’d get lost, the way ancient sailors feared falling off the edge of the world. For me the only way to get that anchor is by engagement. You can’t hide yourself in a cloister. Yet despite the world’s messiness, it is filled with great wonder, so it is a joy to engage. In my poetic journey (which is just a fancy way of saying how I’ve changed and hopefully grown as a poet over the

years) I've picked up advice from a number of very sharp people. Fay Aoyagi, in the introduction to her first collection Chrysanthemum Love (2003), famously wrote "I don't write haiku to report the weather. I write to tell my stories." That's an idea I carry with me. So when I use a kigo to anchor myself to this world, such as 'winter sun', it isn't just to tell you that it's winter and the sun is shining, but also to ask you to feel the chill in the air, your hands warm in your pockets, perhaps collar turned up against a bracing wind, yet also feeling worn down by the length of another long year, perhaps thoughts of mortality... and that the sun is shining weakly through the bare branches of a tree—because that's what I was experiencing when I wrote the poem. The haiku is a short poem, possibly the shortest, and it needs all the help it can get to impart information to the reader. That's why I use kigo, as a shorthand for all that seasonal and cultural information. So when I make the leap from the kigo to the rest of the poem I can't help but be more engaged. Hopefully it shows in the poems.

JG: Impermanence is one of the characteristics of living we often find most discomfoting. When we are enjoying ourselves, it is especially difficult to let go of the moment. However, we know it can't be otherwise and without it life would be static, no new experiences could arise, so we accept it willingly or not. I have so enjoyed this exchange of ideas and poems with you that I am very reluctant to end it. I am glad I had the chance to read your poems closely, to unveil their and your many virtues and artistry. I feel as if we took a long walk in the woods together, talking as we went along and stopping sometimes to look at something that struck us as interesting. Mainly, though, I am glad I had the chance to get to know you. You are a standard bearer of the values we cherish in humanity. I hope we have a chance again in the future to work together on other projects. And, thank you for giving of your time and thoughts and self, for your generosity.

pm: It was my pleasure, Jack. You've been a most kind host, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't gain from this as well. Michael Dylan Welch reminded me yesterday about a position I apparently held a year ago which I have softened a bit on. I doubt I'll ever reach a place where my convictions are fixed and I completely understand my poetics (wouldn't that be boring!), so exchanges like this give me lots to think about. And for that I thank you.



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